

What is the Role of Women in Today's Military?

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What is the Role of Women in Today's Military?

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to

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"The qualities that are most important in all military jobs—things like integrity, moral courage, and determination—have nothing to do with gender."

– Major Rhonda Cormum, Desert Storm POW/survivor

The new "rule" and "definition" of combat announced on January 13, 1994 read as follows:

A. Rule. Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground, as defined below:

B. Definition. Direct ground combat is engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect. (CMR Report, April 2003)

Unfortunately this regulation does not reflect reality. Despite public opinion, the Department of Defense (DoD) regulations should be changed to reflect the current situation: women in specialties such as military police, combat engineers and fighter/helicopter pilots can be, and are now, placed in "direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel."¹

When news of the ambush that killed Private First Class Lori Piestewa and captured Private First Class Jessica Lynch and Specialist Shoshana Johnson, was made public in the United States, there was a sense of shock, outrage, and fear. These three women were all members of the 507th Army Maintenance Company, which was comprised of clerks, repairmen, and cooks.² The eyes of the public were opened to the fact that women in America's military can now be placed in combat situations regardless of their specialty. So, although it goes against the regulations,

today's non-contiguous battlespace, combined with the type of guerilla and maneuver warfare that is being conducted, women in Iraq and Afghanistan are finding themselves in combat.

History

Since the inception of the 1994 Department of Defense policy which provided an updated definition of direct ground combat and eliminated the Risk Rule, several specialties have been opened to women and many billets that were unavailable to women in previously open specialties, were made available.³ The now obsolete Risk Rule reads as follows:

*"[R]isks of direct combat, exposure to hostile fire, or capture are proper criteria for closing non-combat positions or units to women, when the type, degree, and duration of such risk[s] are equal to or greater than the combat units with which they are normally associated within a given theater of operations."*⁴ The purpose of the Risk Rule was to allow women to volunteer to serve in the military without fear of being "forced to serve in units operating in or near the front lines".⁵

During the first Gulf War, more than forty thousand women served in theater and the American public realized

that many of them were serving closer to the front lines than in any of our previous wars.⁶ Although the Risk Rule still existed at that time, the circumstances of the war were different than expected, exposing many women to combat areas. According to retired Lieutenant General Carol Mutter, "They found out that even with women in the rear (supply units), women were still at risk, so the rule was no longer relevant or viable...so policies really had to change."⁷ When the Risk Rule was eliminated, more than 250,000 positions became available to women in the military.⁸

Current Status

Women can now command combat military police companies, serve as combat engineers (still limited to the support side), fly combat missions as pilots of fighter jets and helicopters, and more. Currently there are over 212,000 women serving on active duty and represent approximately fifteen percent of the forces.⁹ Many of them have served, or are serving, in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside their brother servicemen in crucial combat service support, aviation support, and combat aviation billets. If necessary, female chemical specialists go to contaminated areas and female helicopter pilots land in

combat areas to drop off or evacuate infantry troops during assaults.¹⁰ Without these women volunteers, the armed forces would be suffering as there is an ongoing enlistment shortage. The military is unable to recruit enough qualified men to staff an all-volunteer force.¹¹

As of December 2004, the United States (U.S.) Army was accused of violating the ban on women in land combat. The U.S. Army argued that if it were forced to keep forward support companies, which support the units of action, all-male, then there would not be enough soldiers to supply the demand.¹² The U.S. Army's Chief of Staff, General Schoomaker, has "redesigned the basic combat brigade into self-contained units of action that train and deploy with their support teams...including a Forward Support Company", many of which are mixed-sex.¹³ The U.S. Army concedes that they would be violating the current ban on collocating women and that they would be required to notify Congress.¹⁴ According to the Pentagon, the ban has been maintained for two reasons: one, women do not possess the necessary upper body strength for land combat situations and secondly, surveys show that most female soldiers have no desire to change the policy.¹⁵ The outcome of this situation will be determined in the lessons learned from the 3rd Infantry, who are deploying in January 2005.¹⁶

During Operation Iraqi Freedom I, First Lieutenant Adrien Thom, USMC, a combat engineer, had the experience of leading a platoon of Marines into the front lines.¹⁷ Lieutenant Thom and her platoon had to travel together with ground combat divisions; although that was against Marine Corps and DoD regulations..."her commander told her to go ahead, as she was just as capable as any man".¹⁸ While the experience was harrowing and there were frequent fire fights between the Iraqi insurgents and the combat Marines with whom she lived, Lieutenant Thom reflects positively upon the experience since her commander gave her the opportunity to serve on the front lines.¹⁹

Capabilities

Serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom II, Captain Kara Lecker, U.S. Marine Corps, a combat engineer, served as the Bridge Company B Executive Officer.²⁰ This company was in a unique situation, in that they were attached to the Multi-National Corps Iraq, but served under the 420th Army Engineer Brigade.²¹ During her tenure in Iraq, her company was exposed to IED's and indirect fire, but no small arms fire.²² Being one of two females, the other a Lance Corporal combat engineer, in a unit of 138 Marines, Captain Lecker felt that they were treated as equals and both went out on

missions as did their male counterparts.²³ When asked if she thought that women's roles in the military have gone too far, she stated that, "gender is never a question; once in theater, the ones who cannot handle [the pressure] are weeded out...male or female."²⁴

Recommended Policy

The DoD "rule", "Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground", should be amended.²⁵ That is not to say that all occupational specialties should suddenly be open to women as primary occupations. However, there are occasions, such as Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, in which it is necessary for women to support the combat arms troops from locations that are either on the front line or incredibly close to it. These situations clearly violate the current DoD rule. As stated earlier regarding the U.S. Army's mixed-sex forward support companies in Iraq, women are serving at the battalion level and lower. While in Iraq, Captain Lecker saw fellow women Marines manning weapons and out in convoys; she feels that the most dangerous place to be in Iraq is in a convoy, yet

arguably many of the Marine Corps' drivers are women.²⁶ Therefore, either the DoD needs to re-word the exception policy, or women need to be removed from these situations. The latter is an impossibility based on today's military organization and strategy of utilizing maneuver warfare. A recommendation for re-wording of the rule is: Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from permanent assignment to ground units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.

By changing a couple of words, the billets women are currently, and temporarily, filling in Iraq and Afghanistan that are putting them in direct contact with the enemy would no longer be deemed illegal. A good example is that the forward support companies would be able to conduct their missions with the units of action because it would not be considered permanent.

Problems Associated With Formalizing Policy

The greatest problem associated with formalizing a change in policy is the reaction of the American public. An immense concern is how Americans will respond if a considerable number of women are killed in Iraq.²⁷ As

Elaine Donnelly, chairman of the Center for Military Readiness stated, "We would have to desensitize the entire nation to violence against women. Endorsement of women in combat means an endorsement of violence against women at the hands of the enemy."²⁸ As of June 2004, twenty-two women have been killed in Iraq, sixteen of whom died in combat (gunshots, explosions or other attacks).²⁹ That is nearly double the number killed in the first Gulf War; thirteen female fatalities from crashes, mines, or missile attacks.³⁰ As of yet, there has not been a backlash from the American public. The deaths of those women have been reported in the same manner as the deaths of the men, which is the way that most women in the military would prefer. Women want to be treated as equals both in life and in death.

The most widely publicized female deaths since the war on terror began have been those of Army Private First Class Piestewa in the opening days of Operation Iraqi Freedom and that of Marine Sergeant Jeannette L. Winters, killed when the C-130 tanker plane of which she was a crew member, crashed into a mountain in Pakistan.³¹ Private First Class Piestewa was the first female Native American ever to die in war in a foreign land.³² Sergeant Winters was the first female military casualty in Operation Enduring Freedom.³³

The reason for the posthumous notoriety appears to be due to the fact that they were the first females of a particular operation or a particular race, to be killed. The same acclaim has been granted to men who have faced these situations. However, women are a minority in the military, automatically attracting more attention from the American public and therefore the media.

Conclusion

For the past three years, most of the American public has supported the young men and women of the Armed Forces as they have packed up and gone to war. In that time at least twenty-two women have died honorably serving their country.³⁴ Although the public may not approve of the deaths of their young women, they do not question why women are there when they believe in the cause for which these women soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines are fighting.³⁵ So far, that has been the case. The women serving in today's military know the risks and are proud to serve their country. They have been trained in the same manner as their male counterparts and are capable of accomplishing the mission. It is time for the Department of Defense to take another look at the rule and definition of combat, changing the definition to allow for women to temporarily

fill billets that may put them in direct contact with the enemy. This will not be a change from what the current actions that women are performing, simply a change in wording to permit these women to do their jobs. It is time for a change. Not a drastic one, but one that fits the current situation and the commendable actions that are being taken by today's military women.

Notes

¹ CMR Report, "Why American Servicewomen are Serving at Great Risk: Women in Land Combat," *Center for Military Readiness*, April 2003, <<http://cmrlink.org/CMRNotes/M38V8CCMRRPT16.pdf>> (29 November 2004).

² Osha Gray Davidson, "A Wrong Turn in the Desert," 27 May 2004, <<http://www.oshadavidson.com/Piestewa.htm>> (8 January 2005).

³ Jake Wellens, "Women in the Military: Combat Roles Considered," *Center for Defense Information*, 7 August 1996, <<http://www.cdi.org/issues/women/combat.html>> (29 November 2004).

⁴ CMR Report.

⁵ CMR Report.

⁶ Mona Iskander, "Female Troops Redefine Combat Rules," *Women's E-News*, 5 July 2004, <<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1899>> (22 November 2004).

⁷ Iskander.

⁸ Iskander.

⁹ Iskander.

¹⁰ Siobhan McDonough, "Potential For Women In Combat Has Grown Since 1991 War," *MarineCorpsTimes.Com*, 12 February 2003, <<http://ebird.dtic.mil/Feb2003/s20030213154140.html>> (22 November 2004).

¹¹ Iskander.

¹² Rowan Scarborough, "Army Charged With Ban Violation," *The Washington Times*, 9 December 2004, <<http://www.washtimes.com>> (9 December 2004).

¹³ Rowan Scarborough, "Report Leans Toward Women In Combat," *The Washington Times*, 13 December 2004, <<http://www.washtimes.com>> (13 December 2004).

¹⁴ Scarborough, 9 December 2004.

¹⁵ Scarborough, 13 December 2004.

¹⁶ Scarborough, 9 December 2004.

¹⁷ Iskander.

¹⁸ Iskander.

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- ¹⁹ Iskander.
- ²⁰ Captain Kara Lecker, USMCR, phone conversation with the author, 8 January 2005.
- ²¹ Lecker.
- ²² Lecker.
- ²³ Lecker.
- ²⁴ Lecker.
- ²⁵ CMR Report.
- ²⁶ Lecker.
- ²⁷ Carter.
- ²⁸ Carter.
- ²⁹ Iskander.
- ³⁰ Letta Tayler, "Women in Marine supply unit will likely be 'trailblazers' on the front lines," *The Houston Chronicle*, 19 March 2003, <<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/special/iraq/1825006>> (22 November 2004).
- ³¹ Carter.
- ³² Davidson.
- ³³ Carter.
- ³⁴ Iskander.
- ³⁵ Carter.

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